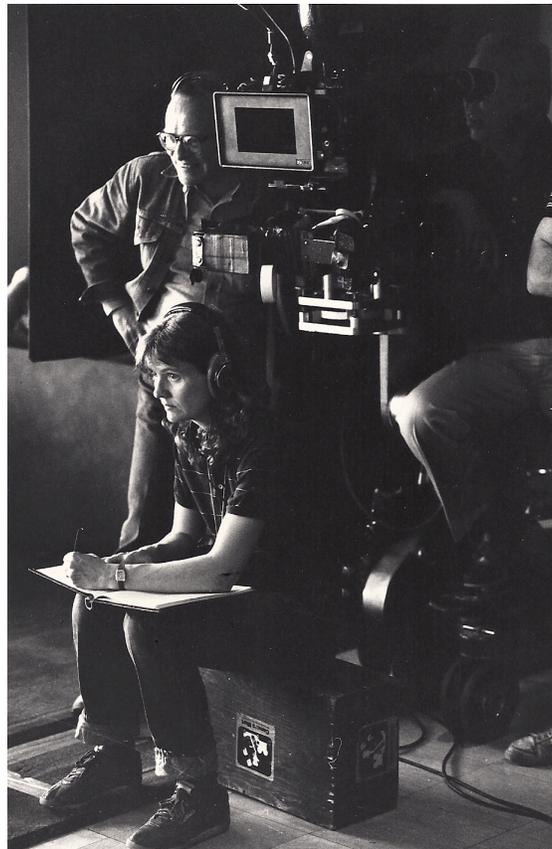


THE LUMET METHOD: A brief essay on Director Sidney Lumet's Pre-Production Rehearsal technique. For film students and filmmakers.

Director Sidney Lumet was consummate filmmaker whose contribution to cinema in the 20th and 21st Centuries is indisputable. Think of ***The Pawnbroker, Twelve Angry Men, Dog Day Afternoon, Serpico, The Verdict, Network, Prince of the City, Night Falls on Manhattan,*** and ***Before the Devil Knows You're Dead,*** not to mention some underrated gems such as ***Daniel*** and ***Deathtrap.*** It is well known that he loved his job and loved to be working. He also wrote; he came out of acting and directing live TV; he stayed in New York; he delivered his films on or under schedule and budget. He wrote a wonderful book, ***Making Movies,*** about his approach. The preparation he undertook and executed for a film represents a kind of genius of method that it is a pleasure to describe. I had the honor of being there for 8 films with him.



Sidney Lumet and Martha Pinson on the set of "Power," 1985. Photo Credit: Kerry Hayes

Mr. Lumet is perhaps one of few major directors who consistently utilized a two or three week, six-hour-per-day rehearsal period prior to Principal Photography in which he prepared his actors in terms of interpretation, staging, and blocking. It started with his address about the piece, a table reading, and a discussion. He often had the screenwriter present. He showed reference and location photographs. It moved on to a more detailed reading and analysis of each scene and sequence, and then to "putting the film on its

feet." On one of the films I did as Mr. Lumet's Script Supervisor, a popular movie star remarked off-highhandedly, "I've been in 28 films and this is the first time I've been in a rehearsal."

The Assistant Directors marked off the dimensions of the sets and locations with tape in a large hall, preferably the Ukrainian National Home, on the Lower East Side of New York City. With a few key props and assistants, Mr. Lumet persistently prepared the cast for a full run-through. Day One of Principal Photography was regarded more as an opening night on Broadway than a place to start. Granted, all directors have their own methods of preparing with the cast. There are many private discussions between actors and the director, which, of course, the Script Supervisor and other members of the crew would not be privy to.



Lumet finds the shot on "Daniel," 1983. Photo Credit: Lorey Sebastian

I observed that Lumet's approach cleared up uncertainty about the arc and pitch of an actor's role, the tone of a performance, the intensity needed for any given scene in relation to what comes before and after. Sometimes on films there are unfortunate surprises and setbacks, such as when an actor comes prepared with an interpretation that is not in keeping with, or is contrary to, the vision of the director. But on a Lumet film the cast was able to run the "film" in pre-production rehearsal so the arcs could be worked out, invented, and internalized. Each scene could be understood and shaped. The cast could be directed in a consistent interpretation of the director's choosing. They had the opportunity to try things to find the character in a safe setting. Questions about historical context, lines, tone, motivation, and sub-text could be explored and/or answered. The actors and director had time to think, make suggestions, mull over what might be missing. Dialogue changes could be made, ad-libs and inventions incorporated. He would have them work for what he felt was the right pace, once other qualities were in place. He remarked that he had a better sense of the whole, that he could make better decisions in the relatively

"safe" rehearsal weeks than he could during shooting when he'd been up since 5am and under a lot more pressure to "make his day." Supporting characters had an opportunity to experience their part in relation to the whole and learn what they must do. He would tell the actors after a great run-through, "That's a print!" In this way, he communicated to them where he wanted them to be in emotion and performance on the shoot day. He trusted them to be ready. There are many ways of preparing but this seems like a brilliant one.

The Director of Photography (and others) attended the final run-through on the last day of rehearsal and would then know the staging. It is important in the Lumet approach that the work of the actors came first – shot design and lighting followed. The DP and Mr. Lumet could confer on the shots, the coverage, and equipment. Preparation of lighting could then be done with confidence. Rigging could proceed in advance of the shooting crew, which increased the speed of work during Principal Photography. The work done in rehearsal saved wear-and-tear, waiting around, and meant shorter hours for all involved. Other aesthetic and practical choices – props, costumes, etc. – were made and put into the works with relevant departments. I'd note the blocking, line changes, and timings established. I'd make a daily report to production with such notes as: Sc. 75 has been moved to the porch. In Sc. 150 they will be eating Chinese food.



Sidney Lumet and Martha Pinson on location for "Power" in Mexico, 1985. Photo Credit: Kerry Hayes

There was an evolution of trust and friendship, the heading off of problems, the confronting of conflicts and the telling of jokes – all the unpredictable and intangible things that come out in a creative enterprise with a deadline approaching. Among other things, Mr. Lumet was an aficionado of Vaudeville and could be relied on to render some priceless bits. But mostly, everyone learned, he was "all about the work." It goes without saying that his insights, knowledge and leadership qualities were in evidence.

In addition to the work with the cast, Mr. Lumet would have extensive planning meetings and scouts with his team. Elaborate plots and diagrams of camera positions (in-

cluding lenses), action sequences, stunts, were designed, revised and published. The up-shot of his planning was phenomenal. One day on ***A Stranger Among Us*** we had a 7am call in the jewelry district to shoot a multiple camera action sequence including stunts. We did 48 setups to complete the work and wrapped before lunch at 1pm and went home.

There is another aspect in that Mr. Lumet's brilliance and experience in cutting has shown him what he will need for editing, so that decisions were be made to obtain that, and less to carpet the cutting room floor. He seemed to be able, as is said of some great composers, to see the entire film in his mind. This is also controversial and perhaps at times he didn't have as much coverage as would have been useful, to provide options. The method I've described is not of interest to all. Some directors and actors are not interested in rehearsing; they feel it detracts from the "freshness" of a performance. Of course, there is no "right" way.

I've learned that directing a film is a high-wire act and no one wants to fall. I hope this essay has shed light on ways that work done in prep can prevent errors, improve the final result, and thus provide a net.

--Martha Pinson, May 2015